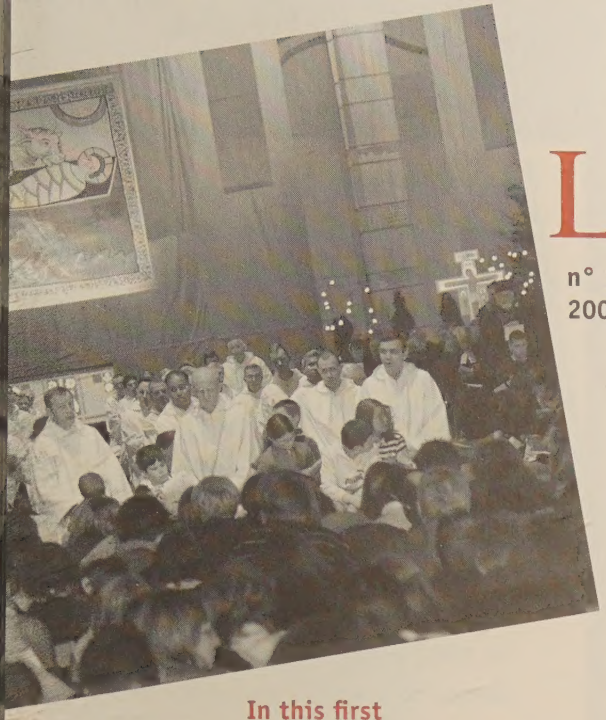

Letter from Taizé

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Struggle with a Reconciled Heart

In this first letter of the year you will find the *Letter from Cochabamba* as well as the *Letter to those who want to follow Christ* and *A call for the reconciliation of Christians*. These texts, written by Brother Alois, were distributed during the European meeting that brought together 40,000 young adults in Geneva from December 28th, 2007 to January 1st, 2008 (photo).

In 2008, the *Letter from Taizé*, now a quarterly, will continue the reflection begun at Cochabamba.

The outer pages of this issue attempt to show how the first two parts of the *Letter 2008* find an echo in recent stages of the pilgrimage of trust and in the life of the Church.

The inner double page offers a reflection on the theme of reconciliation as it appears in Scripture and in Christian thought.

Where can healing be found at a time when a feeling of powerlessness in the face of injustices is gaining ground?

In the slums of Nairobi

For more than a year now, brothers have been making visits to Kenya leading up to the meeting to be held in Nairobi in November. One of the brothers speaks about the welcome they have received:

The slums: the word brings to mind all the superlatives of misfortune. It evokes images of a sub-humanity victimized by injustice and the violence of the ghetto. You experience a physical shock, a sense of suffocation, as you take the plunge into a universe of overwhelming poverty where everything seems to be lacking—space, hygiene, safety, public services, intimacy... Your spontaneous reaction would be to run away.

The fact that friends are waiting for you opens a way forward. Children are playing everywhere and call out amidst bursts of laughter; people bustle about or turn the street into their welding or carpentry shop, their kitchen or their business. Life is springing up all over. When you let the problems occupy the foreground, you miss the point.

Meeting follows meeting, from one house to another; the visitor advances and discovers a longing. First of all the longing for him to be there, open to what is offered. People are grateful that he is willing to sit down, to taste the food they have prepared and to share news of family and friends. He is a blessing; it is a joy to welcome him, to share him by calling relatives, to introduce him to the neighbors.

The harshness of the surroundings makes the determination of those who live there stand out even more strongly. Their daily struggle vividly reveals their courage. They take on challenges with their bare hands, without security or insurance, without a fridge or a deed to property, without a work contract, a family allowance or a pension.

Where does such courage come from? Welcoming life, the rain, children, the harvest, strangers as a gift and a blessing means recognizing that one is loved. The joy felt in receiving life as a free gift inspires and motivates the desire to give freely in one's own turn, to serve life and to care for it as something precious. Could not that be the source of a courage that can bring into play all one's resources and enable one to go beyond what seems possible?

Half of the four million inhabitants of Nairobi live in slums.

continued on last page

LISTENING TO THE WORD

Reconciliation Now

Jesus said: If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

In welcoming us, God gives us peace. But God's peace does not put us to sleep. The word of the Gospel cannot leave us quiet. "If at the altar", says Jesus, that is: in the presence of God, "you remember that your brother or sister has something against you", leave everything "and go; first be reconciled".

The word of Jesus stirs us up. It even encourages us to allow difficult memories to arise within us: "If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you..." The peace of prayer does not mean forgetting tensions, conflicts, situations of injustice.

A difficult memory may be a word or a deed which have hurt me. It may be also that I become aware that I am the real or imaginary cause of the suffering of someone else, aware that someone "has something against me", as Jesus says. The Gospel invites us to face up to such situations.

In order to take a first step towards reconciliation, there is no need for long preparations. Jesus even says that it is not necessary to offer first one's gift at the altar, not necessary to bring one's prayer to a conclusion. He tells us: "Leave your gift there and go now. Such as you are, you can be reconciled to your brother or sister."

Why is reconciliation so urgent? Why is Jesus so categorical? Because God is peace. Searching for God and searching for peace is one and the same thing. That's why the Gospel calls us to give priority to reconciliation. Christ calls us to commit ourselves and to struggle with a reconciled heart.

In order to go forward on the way of reconciliation, it is useful to give up asking oneself if it would not be my brother's or sister's turn to take the first step. Jesus does not say: "Try first to find out who was wrong and who was right". He says: "Go now and be reconciled." For that is how God acts with us. Without laying down conditions, God comes to meet us first.

In what situations of tension or conflict does the Gospel call me to give priority to reconciliation?

What gives me the courage not to run away from difficult memories but to face them so that relationships can be healed?

What gives me the confidence that an act of reconciliation should not be put off till later but that it is possible now, at once?

A PORTRAIT

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons

The *Letter from Cochabamba* refers in a note to wo written by Irenaeus of Lyons: "Our Lord Jesus Chr through his transcendent love, became what we a that he might bring us to be what he is himself." T figure of Irenaeus has a particular fascination beca he brings us so close to the very first Christian lievers. He was born in the second century and gr up in the town of Smyrna, on the western coast Turkey, where he heard the elderly bishop Polyc teach. Polycarp had been taught by the apostle Jo Irenaeus later became the second bishop of Lyons France, not far from Taizé.

Irenaeus was one of the first teachers in church to give his ideas systematic form. His m important surviving text, the five books *Aga Heresies*, is difficult to read. Yet we can sense t he wanted to stress ideas that are important for too. At the very heart of his faith was a conv tion that the unseen, unknowable God who l created everything so loved humanity that he l become a human being just like us. By becom the human being Jesus, God wanted to share w every human person his own, eternal life in suc way that our fragile, contradictory human nat would not be overwhelmed or crushed, but f filled utterly. All that we are was designed from beginning for a fullness beyond anything we co imagine, in and by communion with God.

Irenaeus wrote one very remarkable phra which is often quoted: "Life in man is the glory God; the life of man is the vision of God." Anot translation says: "The glory of God is a living m and the life of man consists in beholding Go (*Against Heresies*, Book 4, 20:7). What is so appe ing in Irenaeus' writings is this notion of "life," cause surely every human being wants to be tr alive and discover ways of living more truly a fully. If so many today speak of "alienation" a "absurdity" it is precisely because of an awaren

Prepared for months with the parishes and families of the city and its surroundings, a Latin American young adult meeting was held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, from October 10-14, 2007. It brought together 7000 participants from the different regions of Bolivia, from all the countries of Latin America and from several European countries. This "Letter from Cochabamba" for the year 2008 was first distributed during the European meeting in Geneva at the end of December 2007.

LETTER 2008

Letter from Cochabamba

RECONCILIATION, A FIRE

Together in Bolivia with young people from all the countries of Latin America, we have been asking ourselves: what paths of hope can we open today?

The Bolivian people, with their enormous social and ethnic diversity, are trying to leave conflicts behind and head towards greater justice and peace.

In many places on earth, current tensions arise from the still festering wounds of history. Where can healing be found at a time when a feeling of powerlessness in the face of injustices is gaining ground?

The young people meeting in Cochabamba have shown that diversity, instead of leading inevitably to divisions or rivalries, bears within it the promise of mutual enrichment and joy.[1]

In Bolivia, we have discovered courageous believers expressing by the whole of their lives the Gospel's call to struggle with a reconciled heart.

[1] When the young people from rural areas arrived in Cochabamba wearing their traditional dress, it was a festival of colours! What joy to see that young people from all the regions of Bolivia could be together: those from the plain and those from the mountains, those from the city and those from the countryside. This meeting showed that young people can contribute, by their way of life, to the emergence of "microclimates of reconciliation." For the Gospel truly to be a force for reconciliation in Bolivia, a growing number of Christians are attempting, in announcing the faith, to take the traditional cultural and religious background more into account.

We draw the energies needed to struggle with a reconciled heart from a personal communion with the living God. Without an inner life, we could not fully carry out our resolve. In God we find joy; we find hope for a life lived to the full.

Has not God himself taken the first step towards us? By the coming of Jesus, God commits himself to a true exchange with every human being. While remaining beyond anything we can understand, God becomes someone very close.

Out of love, God wanted to share our existence. He became a human being. Still more: by giving his life on the cross, Jesus chose the last place.[2] Taking upon himself what separates us from God, he assumes our own being and all humanity.[3] He communicates his own life to us in return.[4] In that way the whole of creation already begins to be transfigured.[5]

This exchange with God becomes real for us in prayer: by his Holy Spirit, God comes to dwell within us. By his word and by the sacraments, Christ gives himself to us. In return, we can surrender everything to him.[6]

Is this not how Christ brought fire on the earth, that fire that is already burning within us?

WIDENING OUR FRIENDSHIP TO INCLUDE ALL

We cannot hold the fire of reconciliation in. It sheds light on a road where we are led to be peacemakers both close at hand and far away.[7]

If we realize what God is doing for us, our mutual relations will be transformed by it. We will be capable of an authentic communion with others, an exchange of life in which we give and receive.

The Gospel invites us to take the first step towards others, with no assurance in advance that they will respond.

In some situations, particularly in broken relationships, reconciliation can seem unattainable. We should then be aware that

[2] For Saint Paul, the reconciliation accomplished by Christ concerns the whole of creation. He was sent to "reconcile all things on earth and in the heavens" (Colossians 1:20). For that, "Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be clung to, but emptied himself, taking the condition of a slave and becoming like human beings" (Philippians 2:5-11).

[3] In a poetic language that draws its inspiration from meditation on Scripture, the Orthodox liturgy sings at Christmas: "The Creator, seeing that the man whom his hands had fashioned was lost, comes down by bending the heavens; born of the holy, immaculate virgin, he assumes the whole human being in his body."

[4] A second-century Christian, Irenaeus of Lyons, went so far as to say: "On account of his infinite love, Christ became what we are, to make us fully what he is."

[5] The Holy Spirit is like the soul of Creation: "The beauty which the world displays is maintained by the invigorating power of the Spirit.... The Spirit is diffused over all space, sustaining, invigorating, and quickening all things, both in heaven and on the earth." (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, XIII, 14).

[6] Communion with God is not always experienced on the level of feelings; the presence of the Holy Spirit in us is deeper. Even without feeling anything we can pray, perhaps by a simple gesture: kneeling down, opening our hands. And already God comes to visit us.

[7] Christ sends into the world those he draws to himself. See Mark 1:17.

Letter to those who want to follow Christ

In the Gospel we hear Jesus c "Follow me!" Can we respond him by a lifelong commitment?

In all of us there is the sire for future happiness. But can have the impression that we conditioned by so many limits t at times we fall prey to discoura ment.

And yet God is present: "T Kingdom of God is at hand!" (M 1:15). We become aware of Go presence when we face the situatio of our life just as they are, in or to create on the basis of what is.

No one would want to bogged down in dreams of an ide ized existence. We need to conse to what we are, as well as to wh we are not.

Searching for a happy futu involves making choices.

Some people make cou geous decisions to follow Chr in their family life, in society, in commitment for others. There a also those who ask themselves ho they can follow Christ by choosi the road of celibacy.

I would like so much to e courage anyone who is consideri a choice for ever:

When faced with such a co mitment you may hesitate. But you go deeper, you will find the j of giving yourself entirely. Hap are those who do not aband

selves to fear, but to the pres-
of the Holy Spirit.
It may be hard for you to be-
that God is calling you person-
nd is waiting for you to love
Your life matters to him.
In calling you, God does not
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ou will discover what road to

God calls you to freedom. He
not turn you into someone who
ssive. By his Holy Spirit God
s within you, yet does not take
place. On the contrary, God
ens unsuspected energies.
When you are young, you
be afraid and be tempted not
oose, in order to keep all your
ns open. But how will you
fulfillment if you remain at the
roads?
Accept that in you there are
lfilled longings and even un-
ved questions. Entrust your-
n transparency of heart. In the
rch there are men and women
to listen to you. Being listened
er time in this way will enable
o discern how to give yourself

We are not alone in following
st. We are borne along by that
ery of communion which is
Church. In it, our yes becomes
e.
Praise which may be hesitant,
h may even arise from our
lation, but which will gradually
me a fountain of joy springing
r our entire lifetime.

a desire for reconciliation is already the beginning of it. Christ takes upon himself what seems to lead nowhere and we can entrust to him all that needs healing. That prepares us to seize the opportunities that arise and to take a step, however small, towards easing tensions.

Reconciliation can transform our societies in depth. The Spirit of the risen Christ renews the face of the earth. Let us allow this dynamism of the resurrection to propel us forward! Let us not be discouraged by the complexity of the problems we face. Let us not forget that we can begin with very little.[8]

The communion of the Church supports us; it is a place of friendship for all.[9] "For us the Church is like a mother who listens to her children. She welcomes; she comforts."[10] These words of a young Latin American challenge us: will we find ways to let God's compassion shine through us?

In situations of conflict, will we find ways of listening to others? So many separations would be less painful then.[11] Let us strive to put ourselves in the place of others.

Will we find ways of ensuring a fairer sharing of resources? Let us dare to revise our life-style in the direction of greater simplicity, solidarity with the destitute and increased care for Creation.

Will we be close to those who are poorer than we are? By sharing with them, an exchange of life occurs: they lead us to be generous and so bring us out of ourselves. Still more, their indigence helps us to accept our own vulnerability. By this commitment we will contribute to having the dignity of every human being respected.

Will we go to the point of forgiving? Is there any other way to interrupt the chain of ongoing humiliation?[12] It is not a matter of forgetting a painful past, or of being blind to present-day situations of injustice. The Gospel calls us to go beyond the memory of wounds by forgiving, and even to rise above our expectation of getting something in return. In this way we find the freedom of the children of God.

Yes, we want to struggle with a reconciled heart, to be passionate seekers for communion, able to widen our friendship to include all.

fr. Alois

[8] See Luke 10:1-16.

[9] Roxana, a young Bolivian woman, expressed the role that the Church has tried to play to help reduce the powerful social tensions that have recently troubled Bolivia: "What provokes the protest, rage and malaise of a people? A lack of love? The powerlessness felt by those who know that their voice is not being listened to? When you want to share the suffering of a people, you feel the need to approach more closely the hope that comes from God. And so, the doors of the churches were opened for continuous prayer; the bells rang to invite people from the different neighbourhoods to information meetings. Young people discovered the power of unity, solidarity and friendship. We young people are the living blood of the Church; our participation and our energy are indispensable."

[10] "God says: Can a woman forget her baby; is she without compassion for the fruit of her womb? Even if she were to forget, I would never forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

[11] Listening to one another is equally necessary in personal relationships and in society as a whole, and even in international relations between peoples and continents.

[12] One of the surprises of the meeting in Cochabamba was the presence of so many young Chileans, given the antagonistic relationship between these two neighbouring countries. On the last day of the meeting, the young Chileans wanted to express then and there a gesture of reconciliation to the young Bolivians by presenting to them, in an open letter, a request for forgiveness for all past and present conflicts.

A call for the reconciliation of Christians

When he left Geneva in 1940 to found the Taizé Community, Brother Roger was motivated by this intuition: for Christians to be ferments of peace in humanity, they cannot put off reconciliation among themselves until later. Many years afterwards, this is how he described his personal journey:

> **"Marked by the witness of my grandmother's life, following her I found my own Christian identity by reconciling within myself the faith of my origins with the Mystery of the Catholic faith, without breaking fellowship with anyone."**

This road opened by Brother Roger requires tact; it is demanding. We have not finished exploring it.

In Christ we belong to one another. When Christians are separated, the message of the Gospel becomes inaudible.

How can we respond to the new challenges of our societies, notably that of secularization and of mutual understanding between cultures, unless we bring together the gifts of the Holy Spirit placed in all the Christian families? How can we communicate Christ's peace to all if we remain separated?

Let us no longer waste so much energy in the oppositions among Christians, sometimes even within our denominations! Let us come together more often in the presence of God, in listening to the Word, in silence and praise:

> **Once a month or every three months we can invite those who live in our towns, villages or regions to a "vigil for reconciliation".[1]**

To prepare such a vigil, young people can set out and go towards others, to another parish or congregation, to another movement or group, and even invite young people searching for faith.

Then the desire will grow to do together all that can be done. What unites us is more important than what separates us: we need to let this reality shine out by our lives!

[1] Every month the website www.taize.fr ("Prayer and Song") proposes an outline for such a vigil, as well as a Bible meditation that can introduce a time of sharing after the prayer. It goes without saying that this initiative does not replace worship in one's own parish or congregation. The *Letter from Taizé* is published every three months in ten different languages. It offers a way to continue the reflection begun by this *Letter from Cochabamba* and to go further with the biblical themes. Subscription: letter@taize.fr

An exchange of gifts between the different Christian traditions has already begun. We see in Taizé that, through praying together and in personal encounters, mutual esteem is growing and that such an exchange is occurring naturally.

Some aspects of the Mystery of the faith have been developed better by each Christian tradition.

The Christians of the East have always emphasized the resurrection of Christ that already transfigures the world. Is it not because of this that in past centuries many of them were able to endure decades of suffering? The East has preserved the teaching of the Church Fathers with great fidelity. Monasticism, which it gave to the West, has breathed a life of contemplation into the entire Church. Can Western Christians become more open to these treasures?

The Christians of the Reformation have strongly stressed these Gospel realities: God offers his love freely and unconditionally; by his Word he comes to whoever listens to it and puts it into practice; the simple trusting of faith leads to the freedom of the children of God; singing together allows the Word of God to penetrate us. Are not these values essential for all Christians?

The Catholic Church has kept visible, throughout history, the universality of communion in Christ. It has constantly looked for a balance between the local Church and the universal Church. One cannot exist without the other. A ministry of communion at all levels has helped to maintain unanimity in the faith. Cannot all baptized persons go further in a progressive understanding of this ministry?

Beyond denominations, it is urgent for an exchange of gifts between continents to develop. The Christians of Europe, for example, have much to receive from the Churches on other continents. In return for all that these Churches have received from Europe, today they can communicate to that continent a Gospel freshness.

The witnesses and the martyrs to Christ lead us towards one communion. They nourish our hope and our determination to seek visible unity among all Christians.

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to share with all; as Brother Roger often said:
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lf. Therefore, for Irenaeus, Christmas was the
the meaning of life, not simply the beautiful
of a baby being born: "It was for this end that
Word of God was made man, and He who was
on of God became the Son of man, that man,
g been taken into the Word, and receiving the
tion, might become the son of God" (*Against
ies*, Book 3, 19:1). It sounds, of course, quite
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up by stressing that God is completely differ-
ther, unlike us or anything we can imagine.
vise, every definition of what it is to be hu-
is almost sure to stress our limitations, our
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." Or as Irenaeus puts it: "The only true and
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we are all made for a life that we never imag-
possible.

REFLECTING ON THE WORD

How can we bring together diversity and reconciliation?

When it is a question of reconciliation between individuals or groups in the name of faith, sometimes the fear is expressed that this may lead to a uniformity that would damage what is distinctive about each party. Will we not lose what is most authentic in our own way? Still worse, is not the strongest party in danger of swallowing up the others by imposing its own vision of things?

This fear misunderstands the vision of unity which is characteristic of the Bible and which is at the opposite extreme from our customary ideas. Our world generally takes as its starting-point the autonomy of each individual or group and then asks how to bring these disparate realities into a relationship. Since the relationships are subordinated to the parts, it is not surprising that they are fragile, always in danger of dissolving. The only lasting unity would seem to be a union imposed by force.

In the Bible, however, relationships are the most basic thing. The parts find their identity and existence by the links connecting them to one another. If God is Father and Son in the unity of one Breath, it follows that each person of the Trinity subsists only in reference to the others. If God is the Creator, that means that the universe exists only insofar as it depends on its Origin. If Israel—and later on the Church—is defined as God's people, their identity is determined by the divine call and the human response to it. Unity does not undermine the identity of each element; on the contrary, unity makes each one what it should be. That is what Saint Paul tries to get across by using the image of the body: "Just as in one body there are many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we are many and one body in Christ (...) with different gifts according to the grace that has been given us" (Romans 12:4-6).

We should therefore not imagine reconciliation with God and with others as a bringing together of originally independent beings. According to the first chapters of the Bible man, created in the image of God and thus implicitly his son (see Genesis 5:3), intends to become "like God" while separating himself from God. This attempt at illusory autonomy only leads to disaster, and causes human beings to become divided among themselves. If God does not resign himself to this state of affairs but sends his Son to reconcile the world to himself (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-19), this is in order to restore the true condition of human beings, turning them into what they are in him from all eternity. Each diversified element rediscovers its authentic meaning by taking its rightful place in the context of a reconciled universe.

Diversity, instead of leading inevitably to divisions or rivalries, bears within it the promise of mutual enrichment and joy.

In the northern suburbs of Paris

At a time when things were once again tense in the suburbs of Paris after the recent riots, a brother made this comment to a press agency:

"The young people from the suburbs are only looked at for the problems and difficulties of which they themselves are victims. But they are never shown signs of hope they could become part of. They are judged according to the place they come from, but never considered for what they are. And so they experience strong discrimination. The present context makes vital questions visible: How can weakened and easily discouraged wills be reawakened? How can attitudes of hope, openness and solidarity take on renewed importance?"

It was in order to look for answers to these questions that Brother Alois was present, next to the Bishop of Saint-Denis, Olivier de Berranger, in the basilica of St. Denis last December 2nd for a meeting and a prayer with young people from the greater Paris region.

Several hundred young adults came to take part in the afternoon workshops on signs of hope in the suburbs. The workshop on the topic: "Living between two cultures" spoke to a lot of young people who often have to deal with tensions between their culture of origin and that of French society.

At the end of the prayer, Brother Alois described the meeting held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in October. Then he added: "I would like to communicate to you from Cochabamba a call to reconciliation, a call to struggle with a reconciled heart. In Europe too, we want to make our societies more human. So many young and not-so-young people suffer from a lack of communion.

"Reconciliation begins with those nearby. Yes, let us begin by paying more attention to those around us, and particularly to those who are poorer than we are. Some forms of poverty are quite obvious. Can we examine more closely this or that situation, alone or with a few friends, go and speak with those concerned, look for gestures of solidarity with them?

"There are also forms of poverty that are less visible. Loneliness is one of them—the solitude of some elderly persons but also of some young people. And there are those forms of violence that seem insignificant but can wreak terrible havoc. For example the prejudices passed down from one generation to the next. Mockery, too, can also be a form of violence.

"Let us dare to face these questions. In this way, trust in God will not be an empty expression."

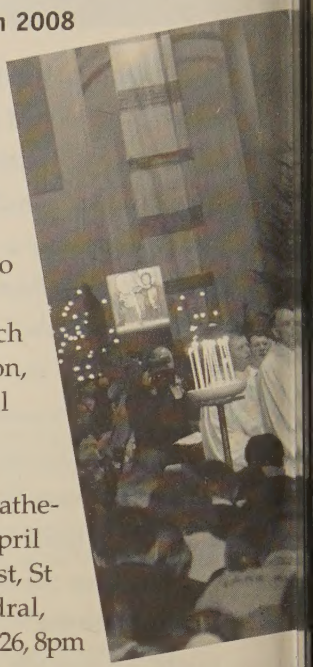
Struggle with a reconciled heart

Homage to Geneviève Schutz-Marsauche (1912–2007)

Shortly before the meeting in Geneva, Genevieve, the last of Brother Roger's sisters, passed away. She had come to join her brother at the beginning of the adventure of Taizé and from that time on had never ceased to lend support by her presence to what was taking shape on the hill. At her funeral Brother Alois spoke the following words:

"For us brothers, Genevieve always remained close to our vocation and she represents for us the image of faithfulness until the very end of life. (...) She joined her brother here in Taizé to support him and to help him with the welcome of refugees during the world war, when he was still alone. (...) She returned after the war when it was necessary to take charge of boys who needed a family; she became their mother. Then later on she welcomed Marie, the baby girl entrusted by Mother Teresa to Brother Roger. (...) Each time I spoke with Genevieve, I said to myself that her resemblance to her brother was striking: the propensity to avoid all harsh words, all final judgments. That quality came from far back in their family; it came in particular from an exceptional mother of whom both of them often spoke. Brother Roger wrote one day: 'My mother had learned kindness for everyone from her childhood on. In her family people refused to disfigure others by words that made fun of them or that expressed a harsh judgment.' Genevieve had that same kindness of heart for everyone."

Some Stages in 2008 of the Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth



Brother Alois and other brothers will go
...to Poland: Poznan, Church of the Visitation, Saturday April 19, 7pm
...to Ireland: Dublin, Pro-Cathedral, Friday April 25, 8pm; Belfast, St Anne's Cathedral, Saturday April 26, 8pm
...to Italy: Turin, Cathedral, Friday May 2, 9pm
...to Romania: Cluj, young adult meeting from May 30 to June 1
Prayers in Bucarest and Iasi
...to Belgium: Ghent, Saturday November 8; Liege, Sunday November 9
The next international young adult meeting will take place in Africa, in **Nairobi** (Kenya) November 26-30, 2008 and the next European young adult meeting in **Brussels**, December 28, 2008 – January 1, 2009

Letter from Taizé

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Correspondence: Letter from Taizé,
Taizé Community, 71250 Taizé, France
e-mail: letter@taize.fr www.taize.fr
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